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Oral history interview with Fletcher
Martin, 1964 Nov. 19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Fletcher Martin on November 5, 1964. The interview took place in Woodstock, New York, and was conducted by Joseph S. Trovato for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript.

Interview

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: This interview is taking place in the studio of Fletcher Martin at Woodstock, New York, November 5, 1963.

FLETCHER MARTIN: '64.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: There, I did it again. Of course, 1964.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Mr. Martin, I have known your work for a good many years. And now, it is a pleasure to meet you. Some years ago, I recall my bringing a painting of yours to Utica as the picture of the month. But this would be in the '40s, if I remember rightly. And I think I even recall that it was a painting of a—of a boat. And I can't remember the title. I think I borrowed it from Gruskin, from the Midtown Galleries. Would I be right?

FLETCHER MARTIN: Yes, I was represented by Gruskin in those days. I—actually, I'm not certain about the picture myself. I vaguely remember of such a picture, but not really clearly.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Are you one of those who forgets the pictures once they leave the studio?

FLETCHER MARTIN: Not exactly, but that's been a long time. And I'm very careless about documenting my pictures if there ever is any occasion, to—for some artist historian to work on me, they will have a hell of a time.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: [Laughs.] In other words, your main concern is making the pictures. [Laughs.]

FLETCHER MARTIN: That's right. And I worked pretty hard and pretty consistently, but it always seems that the pictures get out without the proper document.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Mr. Martin, where did you originate? Where did you come from? Where were you born? And where did you study art?

FLETCHER MARTIN: Well, I'm assured that I was born in Palisade, Colorado, which is a little town about 12 miles from Grand Junction, which is only—I only mentioned that because it's the largest town on the western slope, so-called, of the state of Colorado. My father was a country newspaperman. That is—that term means a man who ran small, weekly papers, and worked as a printer as well as editor and writer of the—of the papers too. In other words, he produced as well as functioned as editor, reporter, and everything else.

Well, we moved when I was six years old from Colorado to Idaho—southern Idaho—where, again, my father had a paper. And this was—Idaho was the place I was raised. That is to say, through my childhood. And part of this time, half a dozen years were spent on a ranch, which my father bought and developed. And after we went broke on the ranch, then we went back to the newspaper business in a small town in northern Idaho. This was Kamiah, on the Indian reservation of the Nez Perce. And during all these years, we were in that general area but not always in the same town. We moved from town to town. Every couple of years, we would

move. Is this—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Oh, yes. This is exactly what we want. And when did you begin to take up an active interest in art?

FLETCHER MARTIN: Well, I only—I'm going to get to that. I just wanted to trace the background of the childhood for the simple reason that it has a bearing on the pattern of my later work—professional work.

[00:05:05]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yeah, very good. Well, then, let us go on at your pace.

FLETCHER MARTIN: Because when I—when I was about just barely 16, I was just through high school. Barely made it. I went—I became a migrant worker. This—working the harvest, worked on the roads, moved by freight train. In other words, I left home at that time. Now, up to this time for the previous five years, I'd worked—and more—about five years, I'd worked in my father's—for my father in his—in his shops. And so, by the time I left home, I was a journeyman printer. A competent printer even though I was just a kid. I knew all aspects of this work in a small shop.

So, when I went on the road—that is to say, bumming around in the Northwest and working at these other kinds of jobs—this was a sort of rebellion against the print shop and the mandatory profession or chosen—profession chosen for me by my father as a line of work, which I thought I didn't on this count like it very much. However, after a year, or several months of bumming around—and I didn't know it at the time, but there was a big Depression on in the Northwest at that time. I couldn't get a job, and I was on the coast. I actually wound up in Portland, Oregon. And it was really tough.

And finally, a—I fell in with a navy recruiter, who signed me up in the navy, which—for a four-year term. I liked the idea of the navy. I'd been to sea before during this period of roaming around. And so I thought I'd like the navy and security and everything. But I didn't. Very soon, tried to—wondered how I could get out. Well, I found that that's not easy to do. So, I decided to go along with the—with the pattern of life in the navy. And it was perfectly pleasant after that. And I traveled very widely at sea during that time.

And I got paid off in Los Angeles, and started looking for a job. And, of course, the job—this was 1926. The job that I could do, of course, which paid the best was the printing trade, which I didn't at first go to. I tried to work in the movie studios as a laborer and so forth. I did work. I dug the trenches—helped dig the trenches, for example, for the film *What Price Glory*, which was made about that time. And—but nevertheless, the trade that I knew was the one that was sensible to go with. And I got a job with a man who printed things for the movies called cinema inserts—that is, all things that are cut into the actors or the actual scenes of a movie are inserts. But these are called printed inserts. In other words, an actor handles a ticket or a menu or a—or a newspaper, or whatever. As long as it's a printed form or whatever, we would make that, whether it was money or whatever. And this was a very interesting sort of printing. And actually my interest in—which had been constant in being an artist was somewhat satisfied sometimes here, because they would need drawings. I would make them. Actually, that's the first application of my—up to then—avocational interest. That's the first time it was actually applied practically.

[00:10:11]

Anyway, all this time working full-time, I had no opportunity to go to a formal school—art school. And—although, I did compete once for a scholarship in a little art school in Pasadena and won it, but I couldn't take advantage of anything but a few of the lectures. This is only to say that in the—in the actual definition of the—of the study business, I am self-taught. But that only means that I had to work harder, pick brains of artists I would meet, and so forth. But I did work very hard on my work, my painting and drawing. Every night, I would work probably an hour spent more than I do now.

Anyway, by 1932, I—that was an important year, because I came east for the first time to New York. And actually, that was the first time I ever came to Woodstock. I came here briefly in 1932 just to visit. I came with a friend of mine who had friends here. But I was always—I was fascinated with the place and intended to come back, which I did eventually. But I had to go back to the coast, because I had a job, which I could have back. And this was the

Depression time. And what I'd come east for was to get a ship. I was going to go back to sea, but a ship was not possible to get. And so, I went back to the coast and took up the job that I'd had with Earl Hays [ph], who was—which is the name of the man who had this cinema insert business.

I was working there when—in '32—I mean, fall or winter of '32. Siqueiros came to—from Mexico to Los Angeles. And he had some sort of commission with Chouinard Art School. He did a fresco there. And then, it appeared that he was not in very good graces in his own country. He was in a sort of an exile or something—political exile. So, he stayed around. And he did—and he assembled a group of students—not really students. They weren't really students. They were people—already artists who were interested in the fresco technique.

Matter of fact, one of them was Dean Cornwell, who has just done a big mural commission in the library in Los Angeles. But anyway, he got a wall on Olvera Street, an exterior wall, and set up the—had the wall prepared, had the students do all this work, get the preparation ready, the scaffold built and everything. And then, he began—I mean, he came with the cartoon, which, by the way, was on the back of a number 10 envelope. It wasn't scaled up. It was only scaled—this wall was 80 feet long, so this was scaled some incredibly small ratio. But they threw it up and got the scale marks there. And Siqueiros had the first section plastered and sent a couple of people up there to begin. He said, Now, this—a fresco is—a public fresco is a public—is a—should be a public activity. In other words, everybody paints on such a wall for everybody, you see?

[00:15:00]

Well, he watched these two guys get up there and start painting. And he nervously walked around for five minutes or 10 minutes. And then he went and climbed up there and he said, Would you mind if I just show you a minute? And this wall, which, as I say, was 18 by 80 feet long, nobody else painted a stroke on it after that.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: After that?

FLETCHER MARTIN: [Laughs.] Yes. Well, anyway, it was a beautiful job and a—and a thrilling thing. And while I couldn't participate in that one, I was down there all I could to watch. And I became very good friends with Siqueiros. And when I did find out his plight—that is to say, he hadn't much money and—he hadn't any money, really. And he had a wife and a child with him, so he needed something to do, and he was also overstaying his visitor's passport or permit. So, anyway, a friend of mine named Dudley Murphy was a movie director. He made [*The*] *Emperor Jones* if you remember that film. And he called and said, I understand you know this painter Siqueiros. And I'd like very much to meet him and so would a friend of mine. My friend's name is John Huston [ph]. He's a junior writer out here at the studio. And so, anyway, Huston and Dudley came. I mean, I set up a dinner at Olvera Street, which is the Mexican street in Los Angeles.

And they had a big time. And Dudley, who was something of a four flusher anyway, made the statement in front of Huston and me that Siqueiros was like El Greco, terrific and marvelous personality and a great artist, and wouldn't it be a great idea if he—if he did a fresco on the big garden wall that Dudley had in his house? Well, this was just shooting off steam, really, and— on the part of Dudley, I don't think he really meant anything by it. But I wouldn't let him alone, and I kept calling him and finally got Siqueiros the job. The proposition was that he would—he would come there with his family and live in the house for the period that it took to paint it. All materials would be supplied. And the design would be whatever he wanted to do, naturally.

Well, he, of course, needed assistants. So, since I'd got him the job, he was obliged to ask me to be his assistant. And, in turn, I asked Phil Guston—Philip Guston—to work with me, who was out there at the time. So, we both would go there every day. I would work in the print shop all day, and then go out there after work. It took about two months. And for the—for all that time, I don't believe I had more than two hours or three hours sleep any given night, because we wouldn't get the wall done in—until three in the morning. And it was a—Siqueiros is a nocturnal worker anyway. And so, it worked out.

And it was a fabulous experience for me, because here's a brilliant, eccentric, eloquent man, the most vivid personality I've ever met in my life. And while not too much talk about art, the talk inspired me in terms of art. And it was tremendous. The subject of the fresco, which

turned out to be very beautiful, but it was characteristically inappropriate for the place it was in, because it was a—an incident in the revolution or an allegory of the revolution. It had a marvelous portrait of the former president, Calles, and in a sombrero and everything.

[00:19:58]

And then, one end wall—one end of the fresco had a big panel with just bodies—bloody bodies strewn all around, which was [laughs]—so, anyway, this—but decoratively, it was marvelous, you see. Anyway, it was an excellent—it was an excellent job for which poor Siqueiros didn't get paid really. I mean, he didn't ever get the money he was supposed to get. Even then, he was very famous, you know. And he really was going to do it for peanuts. He didn't even get that. Anyway, that's too bad.

But it was a fabulous experience for me. And while I still had to work to make a living in the shop, I went—increased my activity in painting. And I exhibited more frequently. I even had a little show of prints in '33, I think it was, at Dal Hatfield's gallery. That was certainly insignificant, but it was my first show of a— one-man show.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: This would be back at '32?

FLETCHER MARTIN: This is '33.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: '33.

FLETCHER MARTIN: And so, I—as I say, exhibited more and got some attention, a couple of—I mean, a little bit of local attention. And then, I won—in a subsequent year or two, I won a couple of pretty important prizes at a museum. And I had also a couple of museum shows, and a gallery show too. Anyway, the Project started along in that time. What was it? '35? I think so.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Well, actually, they began in '33, '34, the Section of Fine Arts.

FLETCHER MARTIN: Yeah, but the—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: And then, in—you know, then in two—I mean, various programs developed and—including the WPA.

FLETCHER MARTIN: Yeah, I know, but I think the—at least in Los Angeles, the WPA was established there, if not '35, '34 at the—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes. Yeah.

FLETCHER MARTIN: —'34 at the earliest.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes.

FLETCHER MARTIN: Wouldn't you think?

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Oh, yes. That's true. Oh, yes.

FLETCHER MARTIN: I don't know when it became a law, but—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I would think it would be a little after that.

FLETCHER MARTIN: Yeah. But anyway, they did set up the Project in Los Angeles. And my awareness of it was around '35, I'd say. And the head of the Project was [Stanton] Macdonald-Wright. And was he—perhaps he was—he was involved with the murals, the public buildings part of it. Lorser Feitelson was an official on the Project—supervisor, I believe. And the western—over—the western head of the Projects was Joe Danysh. And, anyway, the work that was commissioned—I mean, for example, Reub Kadish and Philip Guston did a fresco out someplace in the Valley from Los Angeles. And other people were doing schools and whatnot.

And I was familiar with what was going on, but of course, not qualified on a relief basis, because I was one of the few people around that had a job, you see [laughs]? But I was dying to get in on this program. And, of course, as you remember, they did provide—I think it was 10 percent could be non-relief personnel if the supervisor wanted to exercise this

privilege, and didn't have enough relief people to do technically. So, anyway, Wright—Stan Wright called me one day and said—wanted to know if I would be willing to go on the Project, because he wanted—would like to—me to do a wall. Because of my experience with Siqueiros, I was able—I was familiar with the fresco medium.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: [Inaudible.]

FLETCHER MARTIN: Yeah. So, I took the thing right off the bat, even though I was getting about—I was making maybe \$300 a month in the job I had. And this one, I'd have to go back to [\$]94 or some—whatever it was I got.

[00:25:05]

Anyway, I did it with alacrity, because this is exactly what I wanted to do. And so, I did a—two panels in the—in the North Hollywood High School, which I understand from a few years ago were white-washed out. I'm not absolutely certain, but I think they were destroyed. And anyway, there were vertical panels on either side of the proscenium in the—in the auditorium. They were both—they were 330 square feet each, on each side. And they were 15 feet high and however wide that—I mean, I think it was about 11 feet and five feet and 15 high. Or maybe even 18. But, anyway, these were—the first one, I did the left one first. And that was in true fresco. And I had some trouble with it, but—I mean, trouble getting it underway. But I finally made it. I mean, that was a great lesson in applying the technique without somebody with you, you see? So, anyway, that turned out pretty good. But in the meantime, there was a Treasury competition from—involving the 11 western states. That's a Section of Fine Art.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: That's right.

FLETCHER MARTIN: For the federal building in San—in San Pedro, California. Well, I submitted designs for that competition. And just about the time I had done this first section of the fresco, I won this job. Which was—it paid quite a bit of money, that is, for me at the time—around \$5,000, I guess. So, that was a big prize for me. And there was some necessity—I forget what—some deadline involved. So, anyway, it was necessary that I go faster on the—on the high school job than I had been going. The result was I changed from true fresco to egg tempera for the right-hand wall. And that's what I executed that in. And actually, it was fairly compatible in appearance except for the smoothness of the right wall.

But this other job was for this federal building in San Pedro. And I think, as I recall, it was about seven or eight feet high and 40-some feet long. It was in the lobby of the post office, which was in the federal building. Anyway, this was—I chose to do this oil on canvas, or wax medium on canvas with oil pigment. And I took a—I mean, I needed a big place to work. And I wound up joining the—joining with Paul Sample, who was doing another Section of Fine Arts job in a loft over in Pasadena. So, that's where I actually executed that. Now, that wall is still there as most of the post office walls are, I guess.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Have you seen it recently?

FLETCHER MARTIN: No, I haven't seen it for 15 years, I guess.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: And how did it look to you then?

FLETCHER MARTIN: Well, it didn't look as good as it—I wished it was better, but it didn't look any worse than—it looked better, I would say, than I expected it to, but not as good as I wish it were, you see? And so, the—during the time of this—of the execution of this job, which took—I guess I was involved a year or so. And I quit the Project, of course, to do this other job—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes.

FLETCHER MARTIN: —when I finished the high school wall. And then, in the next year or two—and by the way, that's the—that was all I worked on the WPA.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: The WPA was that—

FLETCHER MARTIN: Yeah.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —high school that—

FLETCHER MARTIN: It was this North Hollywood High School, North Hollywood, California. It's just over the pass from Hollywood itself.

[00:30:15]

And then, after I completed the Section job for San Pedro federal building—I mean, sort of along in there, I submitted designs on—they had a sort of running competition for very small post offices, you know? Or they were given as secondary prizes for a bigger competition. Anyway, I did two post offices—small post offices. I did one in Kellogg, Idaho and one in La Mesa, Texas.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

FLETCHER MARTIN: So, actually, the—another—yes, I did do a Project—additional project on the—for the WPA. Joe Danysh, as I told you, was western director for the 11 western states. And he and I had lived and knew people in—and had lived in Idaho. So, in Boise, Idaho, they were going to build a—no, they were going to—going to decorate an existing city hall. It was several stairwell panels and two or three big walls. Quite a bit of space, maybe altogether 1,000 feet—square feet, and no more than that, I believe.

But, anyway, I did go back on the Project. I would say this is about '36 or '37, along in there. I went up there and looked over the job, did research for it, and actually did the designs for most of it. I mean, not cartoons, but designs, and not full color all of them, just a couple full color. It was approved, but then there was some quarrel about the authorization. And so, anyway, it hung around so long that I never did it. And whether anybody else did, I don't know.

I forgot another thing that I did on the Project. This also was Section of Fine Art. And that wasn't a mural. It was a sculpture. Intaglio [ph] relief sculpture I did for the exterior of the—of the Bonners Ferry post office—Bonners Ferry, Idaho.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: [Inaudible.]

FLETCHER MARTIN: That's all I believe I did in the—in the Projects.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Well, this is a very good account.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

FLETCHER MARTIN: I should add, I suppose, that I did the La Mesa, Texas little post office job. I did that on oil on—in oil on canvas in—in, I believe, '37 or '[3]8. It might have been the spring of '38. And then I did the sculpture for the Bonners Ferry post office. I did the models for that and carved one panel. And then, stone masons did the other one. I did that in late '38. I didn't go up on the installation of that job.

But then, in '39, I won the—as a secondary award in the—in the Dallas competition, I believe it was, I won this Kellogg, Idaho job. And I didn't actually paint that until '40, because I went to New York in the middle or the early spring of '40.

[00:35:06]

And then I was appointed to—as resident in the University of Iowa, '40. It's a big job for me. And I had to move and everything. So, I didn't actually execute the painting until I got to Iowa. And in the holiday, I believe it was—I can't remember if it was the summer of '41 or the spring vacation of '41—I drove out there with Peter Janson [ph], H. W. Janson [ph], who's an art historian at NYU now. I mean, he's the head department down there. We went out and put this up in the spring, I believe, of '41. I had a terrible automobile accident on—after I'd put it up too. We didn't get hurt, but we were lucky to have been—gotten rid of the mural before we had it.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: [Laughs.] Mr. Martin, were you able to utilize your fresco technique and the—and this whole experience on these projects—mural projects that you executed in your later painting? How did it—I mean, how would you—would you relate that experience with the work of yours that was to follow?

FLETCHER MARTIN: Well, I didn't do another fresco after that time—that is to say, not another fresco commission. In fact, I haven't—except for one occasion, have done no other

walls since that time. It's just happened to be that this was my interest at that time, and the projects were the opportunity. I do want to say, however, that this was the most thrilling time in my life—professional life—for me and for all the artists involved, because here was a—here was a whole surge of excitement and activity, which I think inspired everybody of that generation in a sort of permanent way. I have a terrific nostalgia for the time, the excitement of the time. And I know that it affected, not so much literally what I did, it just gave me a shot in the arm for the whole rest of the time. Even now, I regard it as the very most important time. And I'm sure that most other artists of my time would agree that it affected them the same way.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: And do you wish to add anything else before we close, Mr. Martin?

FLETCHER MARTIN: I want to say that the direct effect of the Projects—the Project work on me personally was—and I'm sure it was thus with most others too, because I was a fairly young man at that time—and that is the war coming immediately on top of the Projects. Here, you had a distraction of enormous magnitude. I mean, an accident which took everybody's thoughts away from the great thing of the time, of the projects, to something else, which was a foreign thing. Now, I met—after being in Iowa for a year and Kansas City for a year and a half, I left then as a war correspondent—war artist correspondent for *Life* magazine. And I went immediately to Africa. And then, the next year, I went to Normandy.

And this sort of interrupted this great thing in turning it away from one being able to apply these techniques of the Project time to something consistent with that. The war work was entirely different and entirely different demands, you see? But it—as I say, it was powerful enough in its effect on me to bridge even the war. And I still have this great feeling about it.

[00:40:36]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Well, Mr. Martin, I feel that you have given us a fine record of your recollections of the '30s. And I want to thank you on behalf of the Archives of American Art for your contribution to this record. Thank you very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]